Wood & Water

Step Aboard & Sail Into History

News from Hunter's Yard - Home of the Norfolk Heritage Fleet Trust - Issue 7 Autumn 2025

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Contact Us

We're always keen to hear from our readers, and welcome images, stories, recollections; in fact anything Broads and Hunter's Yard related which might be of interest and add to our history.

Wood & Water is a 'work in progress' so any suggestions for content, articles, images and design are also appreciated.

To email us or find out more, just hit one of the buttons below

Email the Editor

Association of Friends

Norfolk Heritage Fleet Trust

In this issue

From 'Dad's Army' afloat, to a Local Legend hammering white-hot iron, Hunter's Happy Hundred and vast Tallships in Amsterdam, we hope that we have something for everyone.

The key thing to remember is that everything we do, every penny we raise through events, Friends' subscriptions, donations and legacies goes directly to 'Keep The Fleet Afloat' and 'Get Young People Sailing'

Hunter's Happy Hundred has been launched to create a Bursary, helping to secure the future, allowing generations of young people to discover confidence, teamwork, and independence through sailing. On page five, you can find out more. Join the Hunter's Happy Hundred and help us keep the wind in their sails.

Our Heritage Open Day on September 13th was a great success with 200 visitors and nearly 100 went for a sail.

YouTube

Hunter's Yard has a YouTube channel with some very interesting videos about how the yard works, excellent instructional pieces and a few not very serious ones, just for fun.

Please visit us by clicking on the YouTube logo and 'Subscribe' to our channel FREE

We hope that you enjoy them and we welcome comments and suggestions.

SUBSCRIBE

Young sailors? Special rate

Making it easy for the younger generation to get out sailing, we have introduced a special rate. All season, under 25 age crews get a 20% discount and we hope that will give them the chance for a break from work or before going on to university. If you have family that qualifies, do tell them.

Have you been coming to Hunter's for years? Let us know your story for the archive

Group or individual - we would love to hear your tales. In the office we regularly find ourselves welcoming hirers who started sailing here sixty years ago. It is quite humbling knowing that you know the yard more than we do and we are keenly aware that we are caretakers of the yard for you and future generations.

We recently welcomed a sailing group from Kent returning for the first time in 40 years having met at the yard as children. They had such an enjoyable time they plan a bi-annual reunion, and we look forward to seeing them in 2026.

If you have been coming for years, send your story and we'll add it to the Hunter's archive for future generations and, if you have photographs, even better.

Donations and Legacies

Not everyone knows that Hunter's Yard is the home of the Norfolk Heritage Fleet Trust, a charity set up in 1995. The mission of the charity is to maintain the boats and yard and use them for educational purposes. All our income goes to fulfil these two aims.

This year we will introduced 534 young people to sailing on the Norfolk Broads. These were largely young people who might not otherwise have a chance to experience the Broads, let alone a sail on them. We hope that some of them, with our help, will develop a lifelong passion for sailing.

Every penny counts and plays a critical role in keeping the boats and yard going and, most importantly, getting young people out sailing.

If you would like to make a donation or consider a legacy, more information can be found on the Trust website here

Skippers wanted - volunteer

Offering skippered 2-hour, half-day or full-day sailing experiences through the season for visitors is a really important part of what the yard does. We always need volunteer skippers to help us out on these sails. In return, you are welcome to use the boats at quiet booking times. Our regular skippers find these sails great fun, often meet interesting people and take real delight in introducing potential sailors to the joys of the Broads. If you are local and have the time, do let us know. We'd be pleased to put you on the roster.

Skippers wanted - paid

We are looking for paid skippers to help out with our youth sailing programme and RYA courses. Our youth expeditions last from a couple of hours to a full week. RYA courses usually last a week and we also run "introduction to cabin boats" for hirers where we skipper them during the day with some informal tuition, mooring them overnight and returning next morning. You meet great people, get out on the water and can have a lot of fun. If you would like to be put on the skipper roster, do get in touch - we would love to hear from you!

Do you love coming to Hunter's Yard and The Broads? Become a Friend.

There are now more than 900 Friends of Hunter's Yard playing a vital role in supporting the Trust.

Local Friends help out at the yard through the season, getting the yard ready in the Spring and putting it to bed in the Autumn. Friends receive regular newsletters and are invited to two Friends' gatherings at the Yard each year. These convivial events feature skippered sailing barbecues and refreshments, and raise additional funds for the Trust.

Friends also receive special rates on the cabin yachts in Friends week. For older Friends who perhaps cannot get out on their own anymore, there is a week-long skippered sail in the season.

Special booking access for Friends

If you are a Friend, you have priority access to the half-deckers at short notice and at a discounted Friend's rate. So, if the weather look promising on Friday afternoon and you suddenly fancy a sail that evening or over the weekend just give us a ring. We'll see what is available.

All contributions to the Friends go directly to support Trust projects at the yard such as the installation of electric motors, or providing skippers for various educational or other sailing activities.

If you'd like to become a Friend and support the Fleet and Trust, please visit us here

Gift vouchers are also available on the website for skippered sails, hire bookings and merchandise purchases.

Merchandise

All manner of clothing, mugs, books, caps and other items are available to buy on-site.

HELP US BUILD A BURSARY - "Turning 'I cannot' into 'I can' since 1968."

Since 1968, Hunter's Yard has helped generations of young people discover confidence, teamwork, and independence through sailing.

Now we need your help to make sure that continues.

For decades, youth groups have enjoyed a 30% discount — but there's never been a true bursary fund behind it to support it. Post-Covid, that needs to change.

We're building a real bursary so that every young person, whatever their circumstances, can experience the freedom of the Broads and the lessons the water teaches.

Our goal: 100 Supporters, each giving just £10 a month.

Together, **Hunter's Happy Hundred** will create a fund to keep young sailors afloat for years to come.

No gimmicks, no prizes — just the quiet satisfaction of knowing you're carrying forward a legacy that began with Dr. Sir Lincoln Ralphs' belief:

"The purpose of education is to turn 'I cannot' into 'I can.'"

Be part of that story.

Join Hunter's Happy Hundred and help us keep the wind in their sails.

HUNTER'S HAPPY HUNDRED
HELP US BUILD A BURSARY

100 HUNTER'S HAPPY HUNDRED
SMALL GIFTS. BIG WAVES.

To find out more about The Happy Hundred and bring joy and achievement to young lives, click on a smiley sun. To sign up, scan the QR code

Another years slips by.....

The year swings round as it has for nearly a hundred years, with the last weeks of October beckoning the fleet into their winter protection of the ageing boat sheds at Ludham. After a season of sailing of all kinds, from gentle skippered sailing for a couple of hours, to the long hours of the Three Rivers Race, days and days in the experienced and caring hands of the splendid people who have hired Hunter's boats every year, sometimes for decades, they need some TLC.

The story is the same.

Clear the sheds of tables, storage racks, the reception desk, displays, life-jacket racks and everything else that takes up the space during the season. The sheds are crammed with boats in the Winter, so every bit of space counts.

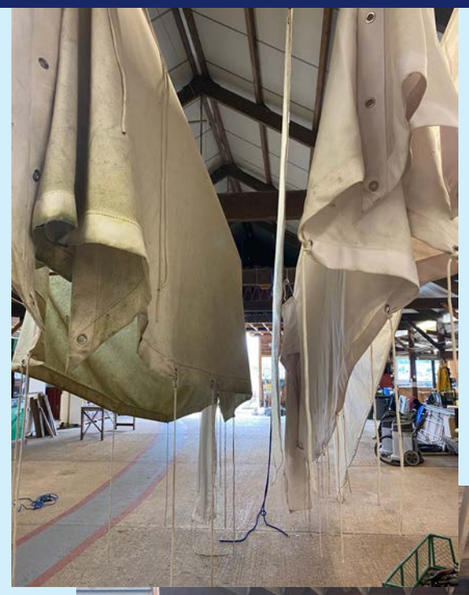
Ian, the Yard Foreman, comes up with a plan of works for boats need to positioned very carefully as they all come out to allow access for the various repairs and maintenance tasks that need to be carried out.

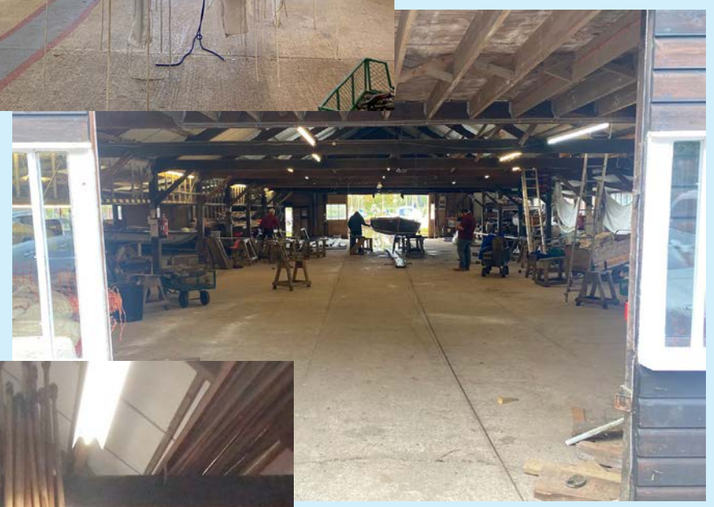
All the boats are stripped of everything that can be removed: Spars and rigging, sails, drawers and their contents, hatches, gas bottles and the gas stoves themselves (so that they can be serviced). We have said before that each boat is unique so nearly every that fits a specific boat is individual and will not fit another, so they are all marked in some way.

The sails have to be dried, either rigged in the dyke or hanging up in the sheds if necessary, then rolled and stored.

Using the old wooden greased ways and slips, the smaller boats come out first as they have to fit under a lower part of the shed.

Along with the regular maintenance work which results in the gleaming, varnished boats people





see in the Spring, it is planned that two yachts will have new canvas cabin sides tailored and fitted, two tabernacles will be replaced, various damaged parts repaired, a new stem head on one of the Rebels and an electric motor fitted to Lullaby.

The list will certainly be much longer when everything has been considered and examined.

Question:

What are appropriate collective nouns for
Quants and Crutches?

Quants - A Splosh?
Crutches - A Stand?

Ideas to the editor and most amusing and/or sensible suggestion will win absolutely nothing beyond our admiration and the word being added to our (very) unofficial dictionary

We are very lucky to have such a skilled, committed and experienced group working on the fleet.

One of the best kept secrets on the Broads is the Barton Charter Yacht Regatta.

If my memory is correct it began years ago when Blake's was one of the two companies through which you booked your holiday on the Broads.

At the end of the season Blake's organised a regatta for hire yachts and I seem to remember that you couldn't just hire a yacht and turn up to the regatta, you had to wait to be asked by your yard if you would like to come back for the end of season regatta. It was an honour and a privilege to be trusted to hire a yacht and take it to the Blake's Regatta.

Blake's is long gone but the Regatta lives on, organised by Andy & Anne Hamilton from Eastwood Whelpton at Upton. It usually takes place in the first week of October on Barton Broad.

The Three Rivers Race now sees quite a number of Hunter boats taking part and we even have our own trophy but sailing for twelve hours together with raising and lowering the mast four times is not for everyone, but does the idea of racing on Barton in company with three or four other Hustlers sound attractive ?

The racing has usually started on Monday and there are two races in the morning and then another two in the afternoon (obviously weather dependent). On the Thursday or Friday there is likely to be a river race to help everyone 'Get Home'! On the last evening of the regatta there is a happy festive dinner in one or other of the riverside pubs. It's fun and marks the end of the sailing season

So …… if you have ever wondered which Hustler really is the fastest of the five, or if you have a secret desire to go racing in a Hustler, here is your chance.

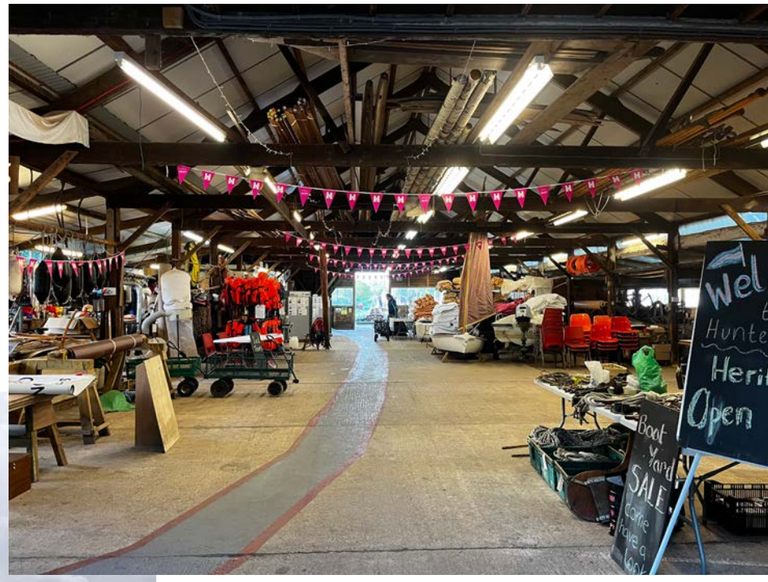
The dates for the Barton Charter Yacht Regatta next year are yet to be finalised but it will almost certainly be one of the first two weeks in October next year. If you are interested please contact us in the office. If four or five boats go from the Yard then we would very likely have a support boat on Barton for you and might even be able to help with providing skippers or instructors to sail with you.

It could be quite a week and at the end of it if yours wasn't the fastest hustler then you would know which one you wanted to book for the next regatta !!

Words: Neville Khambatta, Chair of The Norfolk Heritage Fleet Trust

Hunter's Yard Heritage Open Day

Over 200 visitors. Ninety-three visitors went sailing! Over £1,000 raised for the Trust!



Heritage Open Day, 2025 was a great success. We welcomed around 250 visitors for sailing, tours of the yard and refreshments. Ninety-three visitors got out on the water and we hope many of them will be back next summer. Cabin boats and half-deckers were roped in, the sun shone, and

Lucky Rebel and Lucent were very busy all day.

Keep an eye out for events next year!

people picnicked on the lawns. Volunteer skippers did a sterling job - next time we need to make sure they get a lunch break! The popularity of the sailing, and of the whole day, took us a bit by surprise.

The refreshments tent did a roaring trade with home-made cakes. The boat jumble tables were popular and browsers picked up some great bargains. We kept the tables going into the following weeks before the end of the season and holiday boat hirers were pleased to hoover up most of the remaining items.

A huge thank-you to the volunteer skippers, tea tent, greeters, bookers and tour guides and the organising team (Ezra, Dan, Ela and Jan) and to everyone at the yard for making the day a great success.

Do lovers of Swallows & Amazons ever grow up...?

2025 Schools and Youth Summary

Primary schools group ready to set sail

Hello!

My name is Ela and I'm the Schools, Youth, and Community Coordinator. As this season comes to a close I am excited to share what the Norfolk Heritage Fleet Trust has achieved this season.

This season we have provided opportunities for 534 young people to experience sailing. Twelve different schools and youth groups have visited Hunters Yard for two-hour sailing 'taster-sessions' and heritage activities.

During their sailing sessions they get an introduction to sailing, learning the basics from hauling on sheets to wind awareness to steering.

They also learn about the heritage of the Broads through onshore activities including a tour of Hunters Fleet, a visit to the Norfolk Wherry Trust and the wherry Albion, knot-tying, sign-writing, and model boat-making.

Out of the 534 young people who visited us, 358 of the children were from eight primary schools and 96 students from a secondary school.

An additional 64 participants were from three youth groups including the YMCA, Matthew Project, and Benjamin Foundation. Alongside these young people, approximately 130 adults took part, accompanying them during their time on the water. All of this was possible because of the hard work of seventeen skippers who worked with us this season and the Hunters Yard crew.

Our time spent with Year 6 at Hunter's Yard was simply magical. From the start, entering a genuine working boat yard we were all made to feel welcomed and very safe. Within a very short amount of time the children were taken through safety drills, equipped with life jackets and assigned to a working sailboat. Each small group was welcomed aboard by an incredibly experienced skipper and made to feel very special. For many of our children this was their first experience of being on a boat and their faces grimaced and boats slightly moved as they climbed aboard - still moored at the quay!

Within minutes the children were immersed in the natural beauty of the Norfolk Broads. Even the most anxious children's gasps and muffled squeaks as the boat tipped as the wind caught the sails changed quickly into yelps of delight and requests to go faster. The skippers soon gave over the control of the sailing boats and sails. Safety was paramount yet seamless. The children were soon introduced to the language and etiquette of sailing as well as enveloped in the sounds of the wildlife; spotting a low flying bittern too!

We were invited for the first time to Hunter's Yard last year and it has quickly become a favourite experience for the children and staff.

The children left with smiles and additional confidence which is priceless -this is what all school trips should look like.

Thank you

Toby Whalen
Deputy Head
Mile Cross Primary School

Young people learning about pulley purchase at the Norfolk Wherry Trust as part of the onshore activities

Young student from St Mary's Primary School learning to sail with skipper

The sailing residential trip that 2 groups of year 8 students attended with Hunter's Yard last academic year was extremely beneficial for the students chosen and has, I believe, positively impacted a range of useful, life-long soft skills. Not only did the students become proficient in sailing, learning and applying specialist vocabulary and putting these skills into practical action, but they learnt how to work collaboratively, with people of different ages and walks of life.

I have seen their independence, confidence and enthusiasm for learning new skills thrive in the weeks since and this will undoubtedly stand them in good stead for the remainder of their school lives and further beyond.

Mrs M Jacotine
Assistant Principal for Personal Development
Acle Academy

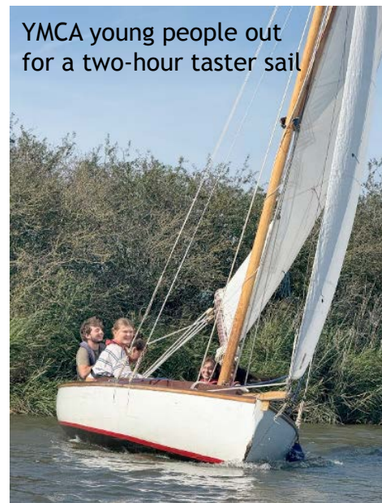
In addition to these day trips, we also ran our annual residential trip for Acle Academy students. The residential trip had a total of thirteen young people who sailed with us for three days and two nights.

The NHFT also offered transformative sailing experiences to young people from the Matthew Project. The Matthew Project is a charity which supports children and adults across Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex with drug and alcohol recovery, and wellbeing. We first provided two 2-hour taster sessions to introduce sailing in a low-pressure, supportive environment. For most participants, this was their first time sailing. From these sessions, three young people progressed and joined us for an RYA keelboat course and successfully completed their RYA Level 1 certification. The outcomes of this project were significant; the young people faced and overcame personal challenges—ranging from anxiety to communication. For example, one young person progressed from initially only communicating through their parent to talking and laughing with the group. One of the young people reflected that "I wasn't planning on actually doing the training but I guess that kinda shows I can do and try new things even if I'm not sure about them. Also, it has helped my confidence with communication skills... it has a peaceful feeling and the people there are really nice."

Although all the young people we work with are Norfolk-based, most have never had the opportunity to experience the breath-taking rivers and busy sailing community right on their doorstep. Visiting the NHFT not only gives an opportunity for these young people to experience sailing but creates pathways for young people to gain skills leading to certification and confidence building, while enhancing decision-making and communication-skills. As a working heritage boatyard, continued engagement with Hunters Yard gives young people an introduction to a community of experienced and dedicated Broads sailors and instructors as well as offering an insight into the future of work opportunities in sailing.

As we look towards next season, I am looking forward to strengthening collaborations with schools and youth groups, working to create opportunities for those who sail with us to develop a deeper sense of term opportunities for their involvement with sailing. Sailing with us can maritime opportunities while giving young people a sense of confidence, that they can take ashore.

YMCA young people out for a two-hour taster sail

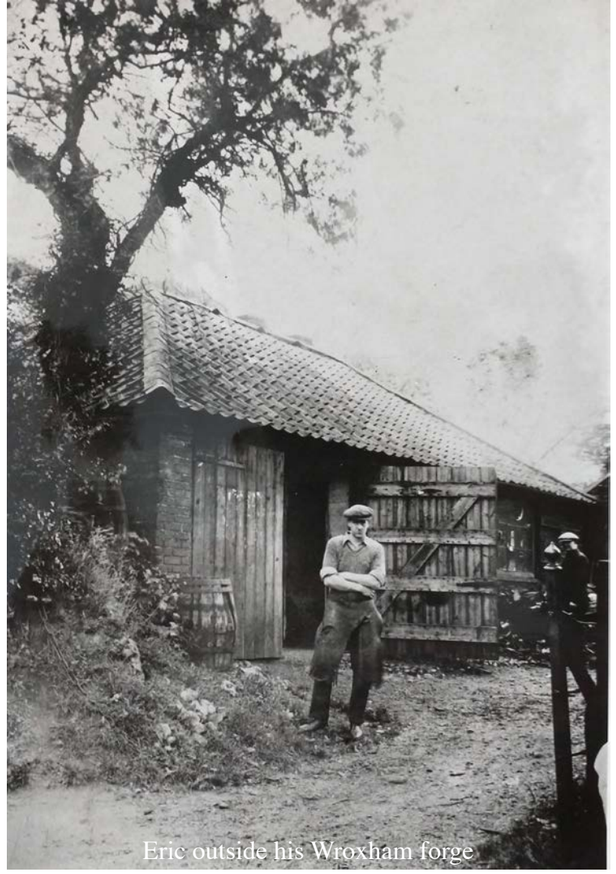


Forging a Local Legend - The finest English blacksmith of the twentieth century?

I had the privilege of meeting Eric Stevenson briefly in the late 80's, in his thatched cottage on the edge of Wroxham, at the heart of The Norfolk Broads. A fire was burning brightly and one of the first things I noticed was a small object in carved metal on the hearth. I remember it as made from a piece of square steel bar a bit under two inches on each side and about four inches tall. It had been carved with chisels into an exquisite head of great detail. Asking if I could look at it, Eric said 'I made it' and that started a long chat about his past and blacksmithing. Out came a photo album and he spoke with immense

St. Nicholas church screens

but quiet pride of working on the gates of St. Pauls cathedral, being awarded his Gold Medal and his greatest work, the screen at St. Nicholas Church, Great Yarmouth, a project of six years. I had no idea I was sitting quietly with a true Local



Eric outside his Wroxham forge

Legend. Other notable ironwork was for Norwich cathedral and Saint Martin in the Fields and Saint Paul's cathedral in London. "I was the first person to work on the gates there (St. Paul's) since they were put in" he had said when he showed me the pictures during our talk.

In my last few years at school, sanctuary was the metalwork shop or, more specifically, the forge. There was something quite magical about the fire, metal and hammer power that could turn two pieces of metal into one by fire welding. Not two pieces any more, but one, unlike working with wood when two pieces will always be two pieces, even if they are glued together. In those

Great Yarmouth St. Nicholas church ©John Fielding Aerial Image

days, no power hammers, arc or torch welding was allowed, so it was all hand work and it was wonderful!
So, when Eric started talking about his life and work, I was transported back to the sounds, smells and feeling of my school forge, in a world of my own as I scrolled, welded and formed metal into what I thought were works of art. What a privilege!

1970 - Eric receiving his Gold Medal

Blacksmithing is one of humanity's oldest crafts. with roots dating back to the Iron Age, evolving with the need to manipulate metal. The essential tools of forge, anvil, tongs, hammer have changed little over centuries. Traditionally, a blacksmith's forge was central to village life and medieval smiths crafted tools, horseshoes, gates, and essential hardware for village life. Industrialisation introduced water-powered trip hammers and then steam-powered equipment, yet true smithing survived in the hands of dedicated craftspeople who preserved the tradition.

In the 20th century, decorative ironwork was still in great demand, blending functionality with ornamentation. It is in this rich tradition that Eric Stevenson became a key figure.

Eric came from a long blacksmithing tradition. He told me it went back over 200 years to Shadrach Stevenson, of Saxlingham, in the late eighteenth century. Recorded in his hand-drawn family tree there are two other smiths in the Stevenson line even before that, Isaac and Samuel, so quite a lineage. When his father died, while Eric was in his early 20s, he gave up a career in journalism to work in the family forge in Wroxham. The first gate he ever made (in the form of a spider's web) is in the grounds of nearby Hoveton Hall. Other works included villages signs, weather vanes, farm tools and many wrought iron gates.

On the 2nd of July 1970, after forty years at the anvil, Eric was awarded the 'Gold Medal and Freedom and Livery' of the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths by Mr. Joseph Diamond, Prime Warden of the Company, at Innkeeper's Hall in the City of London. It was the first ceremony to be filmed in the company's 600-year history.

This story was broadcast on BBC in February 1971 in the 'Look Stranger' series, entitled "By Hammer and Hand"

The Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths is one of the Livery Companies of the City of London, and is

thought to have been founded (in some form) well before 1299.

It was originally a trade guild, established to:

- Uphold standards of craftsmanship
- Regulate the training and conduct of apprentices
- Protect members' interests in the trade of forging iron and later steel

The Company received its Royal Charter from Queen Elizabeth I in 1571, allowing it to control blacksmithing standards in London and surrounding areas, and to enforce regulations.

Inspection aboard HMS Implacable 1934

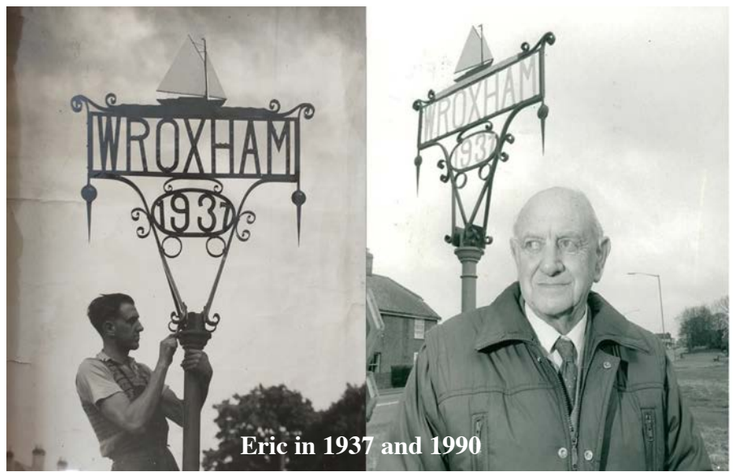
Eric at his Wroxham forge was also the subject of short BBC educational film 'The Blacksmith' broadcast in February 1971 and still available to view on the British Film Institute website.

Eric's workshop in Wroxham, just behind his home, functioned as both workplace and educational hub. The BBC film shows children visiting his forge, watching him forge steel, and even observing his mobile farriery setup shoeing horses at Overstrand.

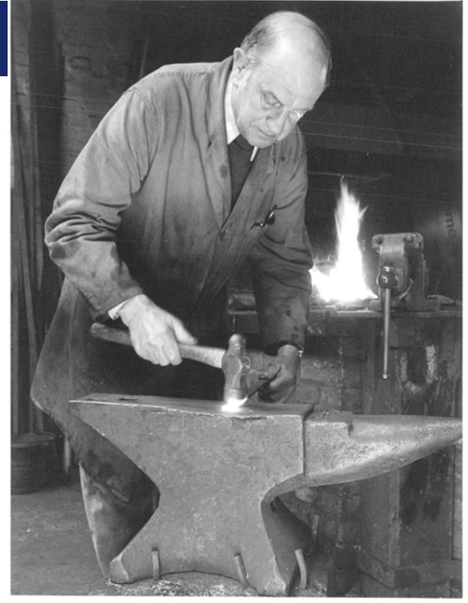
According to local history accounts, he also provided mobile farrier services, crafted iron-wheeled 'tretcarts'; used around Wroxham station for luggage handling, and guided local children in crafting bows and arrows, activities recounted by people who grew up in Wroxham. He is also reported to have driven the fire engine during local emergencies in the 1940's

At the 1956 Royal Norfolk Show, held at Anmer in the West of the county, his stand was visited by the late Queen Mother and Princess Margaret and a firescreen made by Eric was purchased by the Sandringham Estate.

He and his wife, Lily, were very much part of the local community, Eric as Scoutmaster and Lily as Guide mistress. Eric even met Lord Baden-Powell during an inspection of the 1st Wroxham Sea Scouts aboard HMS Implacable during 1934. He also served on the Parish Council. In 1990 he retired from the Council, aged 82, ending a 150 year period of him and his ancestors serving as public officials in Wroxham.

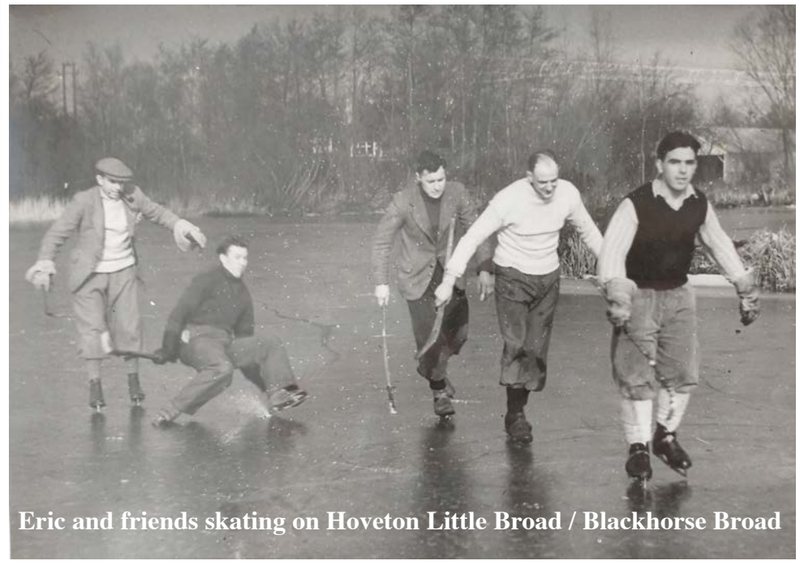


Eric in 1937 and 1990



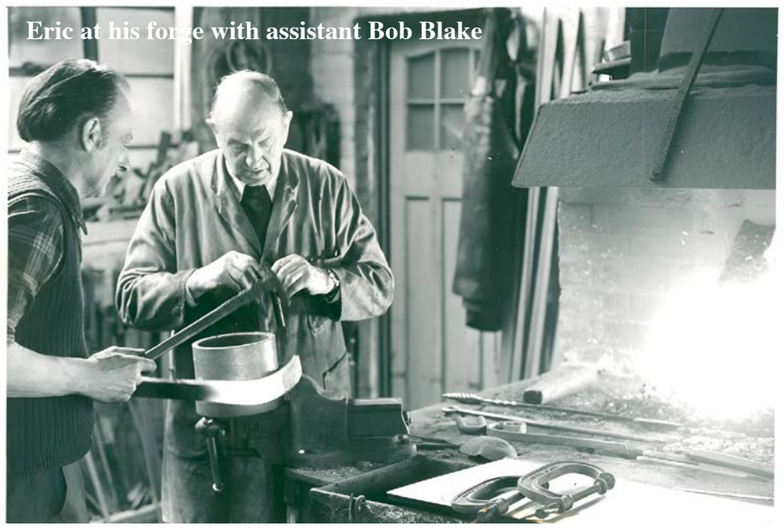
Eric's approach was highly traditional; bar heating to white-hot, freehand hammering, and intricate manual forging. He retired in 1977. Over his career, his work appeared in ten English cathedrals. Although gas forges, welding, and powered hammers were available in his era, his legacy lies in his insistence on hand-made precision, focusing on artistry over mechanisation.

Blacksmithing has seen a revival across the UK and Ireland as both a heritage art and contemporary craft discipline. New educational courses in ironcraft and ceremonial smithing echo the legacy of men like Eric.


Eric and friends skating on Hoveton Little Broad / Blackhorse Broad

Historic preservation movements now restore gates and wrought-iron installations by traditional methods, securing heritage while encouraging modern artisans to carry forward the tradition.

Eric Stevenson's story lies at the connection of craft, community, and cultural identity. His work decorates sacred places, his life enriched local history, and his educational work ensured that forging remains more than a trade.
It became a narrative connecting generations.


Eric at his forge with assistant Bob Blake

In an era dominated by industrial uniformity, his forge was a voice of human touch and artistic integrity.

From the roar of the forge fire to the final strike of the hammer, blacksmithing remains one of the most elemental, tactile, and expressive of all crafts.

Words: 'Whimsical of Womack'

Images: Norfolk Records Office unless otherwise attributed
Eric Arthur Stevenson FWCB 1908-1990
Visit The BFI 'The Blacksmith" player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-the-blacksmith-1977-online
Worshipful Company of Blackmiths blacksmithscompany.co.uk/
Norfolk Records Office archives.norfolk.gov.uk/

‘Dad’s Army’ Afloat - The story of Defending the Broads

The Home Guard on the Norfolk Broads during World War II played a vital role in defending a region considered especially vulnerable to invasion. The Norfolk coast, with its wide, open, and gently sloping beaches, alongside the Broads’ extensive network of rivers, lakes, and marshes, was seen as a potential landing site for enemy forces, particularly via airborne or seaborne assault.

The Home Guard was formed in 1940. Originally called the “Local Defence Volunteers” (and famously portrayed by the beloved TV series ‘Dad’s Army’, filmed in Norfolk) it was mainly composed of men who were too old, too young, or otherwise ineligible for regular military service. They were tasked with defending Britain in the event of invasion,

Cyril Hunter,
Percy’s son
Ludham Home Guard ourtside the Village Hall in 1944
Image by kind permission of The Ludham Archive

particularly in rural and strategically important areas.

n the early years of the Second World War, the threat of German invasion was very real. Britain’s eastern coastline was widely regarded as the most likely point of attack, with East Anglia, in particular, considered highly vulnerable. A vast network of coastal and inland defences was created to destroy or at least slow any invasion attempt. The sheer scale of the defences was staggering, especially considering that similar fortifications were replicated around the entire British Isles. The Norfolk and Suffolk Broads formed a crucial part of these defensive plans.

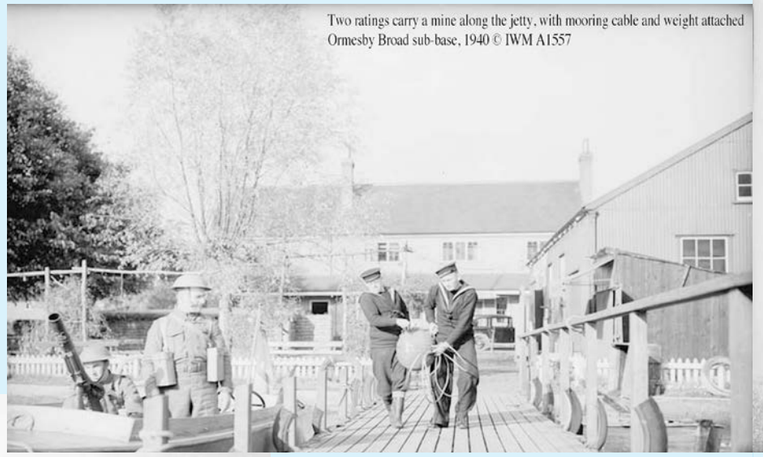
In Ludham for example, the army began constructing a camp in 1939. The first bombs fell on the village in 1940. RAF Ludham airfield was built during 1941 as a satellite to RAF Coltishall and was initially home to Spitfires. The Ludham Home Guard numbered around 80 volunteers.

At the outbreak of war in September 1939, a rapid programme began to build pillboxes, anti-tank blocks, traps, roadblocks, gun emplacements, barbed wire barriers, and slit trenches along the coastline and further inland. If enemy forces managed to penetrate coastal defences, towns and villages were the next line of defence. Major roads, rail lines, and rivers were obvious routes of attack. By mid-1940, the UK was prepared for invasion. Over the following year, defences were strengthened further as new strategies and weaponry developed. Towns, villages, and strategic points were categorised based on the importance of their transport and communication links.

The Broads are flat, waterlogged, and often inaccessible by road. This made conventional military defence strategies impractical, especially during the early years of the war when invasion was a real concern. To respond, Home Guard units and associated auxiliary forces turned to the water for mobility, stealth, and advantage.

The Broads presented several military challenges. The flat, open terrain was ideal for glider landings. Navigable waterways could be used by enemy craft to penetrate inland. A sparse population made monitoring movements difficult. As a result, this region received special defensive attention. A specialist unit the ‘Broads Flotilla’ was set up with its base at Wroxham.

The Home Guard monitored key waterways and bridges, particularly where boats could land or vehicles could cross. They patrolled rivers such as the Bure, Yare, Ant, and Waveney using boats of every kind, from wherries to canoes, including motor launches from private owners or hire fleets. Patrols operated primarily at night, moving silently through reed beds, watching for signs of enemy infiltration or sabotage. Canoes and flat-bottomed punts allowed access to very shallow or hidden channels inaccessible by foot.


Two ratings carry a mine along the jetty, with mooring cable and weight attached
Ormesby Broad sub-base, 1940 © IWM A1557

IWM

Boats were often camouflaged with reeds, paint, or netting to blend into the natural surroundings. Some were equipped with concealed weapons like Lewis guns or rifles.

Larger boats or commandeered pleasure cruisers were sometimes re-purposed as floating observation posts or mobile headquarters. Some were equipped with radio gear, map tables, and field supplies.

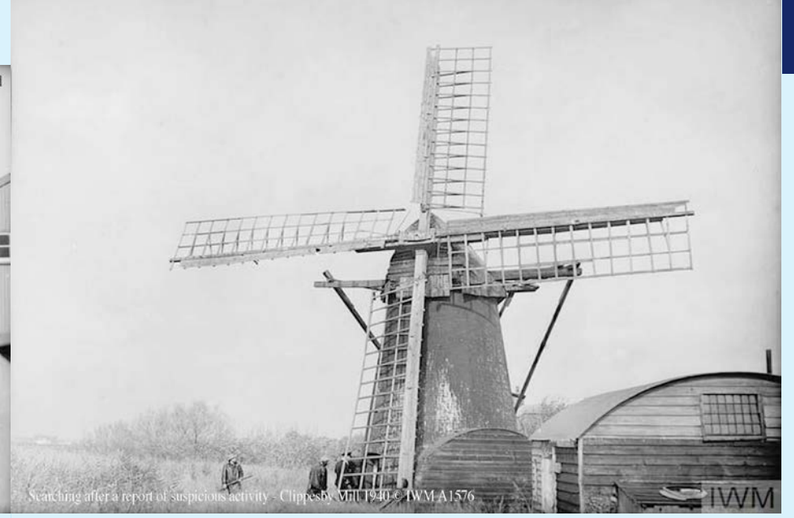
The extremely limited number of bridges over the rivers in Broadland, at Acle, Ludham, Potter Heigham and Wroxham, made them of strategic importance. Units received training in laying underwater charges, blocking waterways, and preparing to demolish bridges or locks to slow an invading force. Explosive charges were also planned for key drainage mills, river crossings, and sluices to flood or deny access to strategic areas. Boats were hidden or immobilised to prevent enemy use, and some waterway sections were blocked with sunken boats or chains.

The flat landscape was also used for decoy airfields and lighting schemes designed to mislead German bombers.

Some Home Guard members were trained in guerrilla tactics and sabotage, especially in the event of a successful invasion. The “Swamp Commandos” was an informal nickname for Home Guard units stationed around the Norfolk Broads during World War II. In this unique geography, conventional military tactics had limited use. Local Home Guard units adapted accordingly, creating a swamp-based guerrilla-style defence force.

The ‘Swamp Commandos’ trained in sabotage, ambush, and irregular warfare, similar to Commandos. Their focus was on hit-and-run tactics to disrupt enemy logistics if German forces landed on the East Anglian coast and tried to push inland through the Broads. They trained with explosives and used booby traps to sabotage bridges or canal locks — vital choke points to slow an advancing enemy.

Many members were locals — fishermen, reed-cutters, and others intimately familiar with the difficult terrain. Their ability to move silently through the complex rivers, dykes, and marshy land gave them a tactical advantage.


Searching after a report of suspicious activity - Clippesby Mill 1940 © IWM A1576
IWM

One of the best kept secrets of World War Two was the existence of the British Resistance Units, Auxiliary Units (AUs) as they were later named. Some members of the Home Guard may have been in contact with or inspired by this secret resistance organisation formed to operate behind enemy lines in the event of invasion. Though the AUs operated under strict secrecy, there is evidence of coordination. Some boats were possibly designated for evasion, escape, or hit-and-run raids from hidden hideouts. These highly trained secret units would go to ground if Germany invaded and operated from concealed underground Operational Bases (OBs). Locally, OBs are known to have been in Ludham, Neatishead, Wroxham, Hoveton and Mautby.

The AU mission included sabotage, assassination of collaborators, and ambushing supply lines. They operated under cover; even local Home Guard leadership often did not know of their existence. Some local accounts suggest Home Guard patrols were aware of certain hideouts or had “off-the-record” orders to avoid specific areas, almost certainly where AU hideouts existed.

While technically part of the Home Guard, many waterborne units operated semi-independently, often led by locals with deep knowledge of the Broads. Naval or Army liaison officers sometimes advised on tactics and supplied limited equipment.

Defence of the Broads was part of a broader plan to create a “stop line”, a last-ditch inland defensive barrier should coastal defences be breached. Home Guard water units were essential to defending or sabotaging crossings and navigation routes that enemy forces might use.

Base HQ, Wroxham, 1940 © IWM A1572
IWM

Although the Home Guard never saw combat in Norfolk, their presence was a key part of Britain’s layered defence strategy. Today, some of their activities are documented in local museums and historical societies, including the Museum of the Broads in Stalham. The Ludham Archive is also a great source of fascinating historic data about the village and its wartime activities.

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Museum of the Broads - www.museumofthebroads.org.uk/

The Ludham archive - www.ludhamarchive.org.uk

Thurne Dawn

© The UK Landscape

A STRANGER IN THE CAMP

One of the views which so many of us are familiar with is the view from the shed door down the dyke when the fleet is in. The line of varnished yachts with their creamy white covers waiting for their next customers to come and take them sailing.

It is truly a fine sight but one which was blocked off for over a year by a visitor.

The Lady Harriet is one of the largest white glass-fibre yachts sailing the Broads. So what was she doing in Hunter's Yard and why was she there for so long? She arrived in the spring last year (2024) and was still with us this summer.

Why, surely Hunter's Yard wasn't about to go 'plastic'?!

Fear not dear reader, wood and varnish still rule the roost. The owners of Lady H wished to offer her to the Trust to add to the fleet but she really was too big and too powerful for us. They also knew that Lady H needed work to make her look her best. in the end it was decided that she would come to Womack Water for a refit and then be sold. The wonderful thing was that when she found her new owners, the Trust would be gifted the sale price which her owners asked to be used for Project Starfish.

Managed by the Norfolk Fleet Heritage Trust, Project Starfish began in early 2024 with the aim of expanding access to heritage sailing experiences for children and young people, particularly from under-served backgrounds. Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and additional local charities, the project offers transport bursaries and fully funded sailing experiences on Norfolk's Broads.

Anyone who has ever owned a boat will know how much time it takes to do the 'little jobs' which need doing to keep your pride and joy in the best possible condition. It was just like that with Lady H only she could only be worked on when all the demands of the Fleet had been met so it took time to get her right and then we had to wait for the right person to come along and decide that she was just the boat for them.

That's why one of the best boatyard views on the Broads had a great big glass-fibre boat sitting right across it for most of this summer as Lady Harriet waited for her new captain to discover her……. and he did !

She has sailed away to above Potter Bridge. We got our view of the fleet back and Project Starfish got a wonderful donation which will be divided up and used over the next three years of the Project.

We will bring you a full report on our Schools, youth and community Project in the next edition of Wood & Water. We can tell you that we have been successful in getting funding to cover next year from a number of very generous grants so the work goes on and can be progressively developed for the future.

Words by Neville Khambatta, Chair of the Norfolk Heritage Fleet Trust

Lady Harriet is a pedigree 1997 Herbert Woods 32' Broads yacht in the River Cruiser Class yacht, number #341, built on a Landamores hull and a past winner of the Southern Rivers Navigation Race.

The extensive refurbishment in 2024 at Hunter's Yard included;

* Spars and bowsprit stripped varnished
* New boom crutches made
* Tiller stripped and varnished
* Rubbing strips repaired
* New white canvas sides to lifting roof
* Cockpit and coaming rebuilt
* Cabin sides stripped, repaired and varnished
* Cabin roof re-painted
* New cabin floor beam fitted, boards replaced. New carpet

Hunter's Yard with it's decades of skilled boat-building can undertake repairs and restorations of wooden boats of all kinds during the hiring season when the Hunter fleet is on the water.

Contact the Yard if you would like Hunter's to consider your works.

The Norfolk Boat

The Norfolk Boat is a small but passionate charity based in North Norfolk, and if you know any Norfolk youngsters who are keen to try offshore sailing for the first time we could well be your first, and most important, port of call.

1982 saw Norfolk businessman, Andrew Cuthbert MBE, come up with the idea of setting up a charity that could offer the chance to sail to the young people (aged 12-24) and the disabled people of Norfolk, regardless of their background or their life experience. As Andrew knew, learning to sail is about so much more than just 'learning to sail'. It's about resilience, it's about learning to work in a team, it's about doing the washing up as much as it's about taking the helm. It's about testing yourself and discovering just what you are really made of.

We offer bursaries for berths on these amazing voyages with our partner sailing organisations, including Ocean Youth Trust North, Sea Change Sailing Trust, The Cirdan Trust and The Excelsior Trust. These bursaries are usually around half the cost of the berth fees as we try to encourage the sailors to fund raise as much as they can themselves. Once we have received a funding application we will assess it and the successful applicants will find themselves out on the sea learning offshore sail training, sometimes on a day voyage, others head off for two weeks a time with The Tall Ships Race !

This season's sailors (all 147 of them) are a good example of the mix of people that The Norfolk Boat has been able to help, we've had local schoolchildren, many of whom had never stepped aboard a boat before, we've had groups from Future Education, the YMCA, the Early Intervention in Psychosis team in Norfolk, Wells Sea Cadets, Empanda Care in Cromer and the Holt Youth Project. In 2023 we had the most amazing young sailor Chloe who came to us through the homelessness charity 'Emmaus' and who joined a 6 day voyage with The Cirdan Trust all on her own, in her thank you letter she wrote :

"I found it all difficult at first as I didn't know anything about sailing but by the second day things started to make sense and every part we played felt like a big achievement…The experience was amazing and I enjoyed it so much. I learnt a lot about myself and what I am capable of."

And that's pretty much it in a nutshell, helping young people push themselves and find out what they can overcome.

Each year we also present the most promising new sailor with The Cuthbert Award but this is an accolade that doesn't simply commend sailing technique, it is for someone who has most notably "gone above and beyond" during their voyage. This usually means a real team player who has stepped up to the rigours of offshore sailing which includes taking the night watch, preparing lunch in the galley but also keeping an eye on their fellow sailors and helping them through the rough times out on the North Sea. Our 2024 winner was 13 year old Riley from Norwich who is now planning another voyage with his prize of £1000 of sailing vouchers. Riley sailed with a group from Castle Farm Countryside Classroom, a centre that provides alternative education to children who require extra support. Despite struggling in mainstream education, Riley flourished on his voyage and now has the sailing bug and everyone at The Norfolk Boat wishes him well for the future. These voyages really can be a life changing experience.

This year we will have granted just over £56,000 in bursaries to people like Chloe and Riley, and when you receive thank you letters like the one from Chloe then you feel that every penny has been very well spent.

If you are interested in applying for an offshore sailing bursary for your youth group or as an individual (aged 12-24 or disabled of any age) then download the funding application form from our website : norfolkboat.org.uk. If you would like to support us as a friend or make a one off donation then this can also be done through our website. Happy Sailing and we look forward to meeting some new young sailors in our 2026 season.

SAIL Amsterdam 2025: Amsterdam's giant maritime homecoming

Amsterdam was in full maritime mode as SAIL 2025 brought a unique flotilla of tall ships, naval vessels and heritage craft into the heart of the city from Wednesday 20 August through Sunday 24 August. The tenth edition of the quinquennial festival coincided with Amsterdam's 750th anniversary and the 50th birthday of SAIL itself, turning this year's gathering into a triple celebration of sea, city and tradition. Masts bristling with rigging on the IJ, cannon saluted echoing along the quays, and a tide of visitor, millions of them, poured into the waterfront to climb aboard, wave at crews, and revel in the extraordinary spectacle.

The festival opened on the Wednesday with the famed SAIL-In Parade: a day-long procession from IJmuiden along the North Sea Canal to the IJhaven, with ships welcomed by cheers, horns, and bangs of ceremonial guns as they slipped into their berths. The parade formally marked SAIL's return after a decade-long pause—the 2020 edition was cancelled during the pandemic, and it drew huge crowds lining the banks and a vast flotilla of smaller boats weaving alongside the tall ships. Over the five days, the vessels remain moored and open for public visits, with fireworks and performances after dark; on Sunday afternoon the armada reversed course for the SAIL-Out farewell.

Among the participating stars this year are heritage and replica ships from around the world, think three and four-masted barques and barquentines, alongside the vast Dutch clipper 'Stad Amsterdam', which helped launch festivities, and a rare sight, all four vessels from Spain's Fundación Nao Victoria (Nao Victoria, Nao Santa María, Galeón Andalucía and the pailebote Pascual Flores) appearing together for the first time at SAIL. Their arrival during the SAIL-In was a real a crowd-pleaser and a bit of maritime history in its own right.

It's huge! By some measures SAIL the biggest recurring public event in the Netherlands. The previous edition in 2015 drew approximately 2.3 million visitors and organisers this year anticipated around 2.4 million over the five-day run, reflecting pent-up interest after the missed 2020 edition and the attraction of the anniversary tie-ins. In terms of the fleet, reporting for the event has been of hundreds of tall ships and heritage craft (with thousands of small boats escorting them) with possibly more than 800 participating vessels in total. The city's waterfront was packed. If you're keeping score

of superlatives, SAIL is routinely described as the largest event in the country and one of the world's biggest gatherings of tall ships, an open-air, open-access museum of working sail and seamanship wrapped into a city festival.

SAIL was born in 1975 as "Sail Amsterdam 700," a one-off party conceived to mark Amsterdam's 700th birthday. It proved so popular that the city made it a five-year tradition, overseen by the Stichting SAIL Amsterdam foundation. Since then, every quinquennium has brought returning legends and new arrivals: square-rigged training ships from Poland and Portugeuse, German and Norwegian classics, Dutch heritage barges, steam vessels, and, every so often, eye-catching replicas of ships that once criss-crossed the North Sea and beyond. The 2020 edition would have been the tenth, but the pandemic forced its cancellation; 2025 picked up that milestone.

One of SAIL's enduring charms is the 'Sail-In' itself: crews mass in IJmuiden's locks at dawn, then process under power and canvas up the canal, each greeted with anthems and salutes as they enter the city. Crowds fill vantage points along the banks, on bridges and aboard charter boats. When a flagship like Stad Amsterdam leads the line, tradition and theatre meet.

The Sail-Out on Sunday mirrored the choreography in reverse; a stately and majestic parade that could move even the least interested as it clears the quay.

promenades and temporary viewing areas become grandstands. For parade days, the North Sea Canal (from IJmuiden inward) offers long sight-lines as the procession snakes toward the city.

At first glance, SAIL is pure spectacle: a forest of masts and flags, an armada of skiffs and sloops buzzing like little fish around giants of wood and steel, but it's also a living classroom. Many participating vessels are 'sail-training ships', where young crews learn seamanship, teamwork and navigation on the water rather than in a textbook, skills that translate into maritime careers and lifelong confidence. Family audiences dominate attendance at tall-ship events globally (roughly three-quarters arrive in family groups), and the vast majority of visitors come specifically to see the tall ships up close. That consistent draw helps keep these vessels maintained and their missions funded.

In Amsterdam, SAIL's meaning runs deeper still. The city's Golden Age wealth literally rode in on ships; its cosmopolitan identity grew by sea.

This events fleet blends sail-training workhorses, museum-quality replicas, and modern classics.

A collections of ships and boats of every kind were arrayed along the various quays. Types included: Argosy, Dutch Sailing Barge (Schuyt), Barquentine, Bilander, Brigantine, Caravel, Carrack, Clipper, Cog, Fluyt, Galleon, Ketch and Nao along with a great number of smaller traditional sailing craft, motor cruises, launches and countless 'little boats' full of spectators threading their way around the waters

The epicentre was the IJ waterfront, the stretch opposite Amsterdam Centraal Railway Station and eastward into the IJhaven and Eastern Docklands, where ships moor side-by-side with gangways open for deck visits. Bridges,

SAIL compresses that centuries-long story into a few accessible kilometres.

Dutch Tjalks (flat-bottomed boats, primarily used for carrying goods across the shallow lakes and canals of the Netherlands) and inland freighters sit alongside barques that once trained Baltic cadets; steam launches; a replica of an Age-of-Discovery carrack showing where global navigation, and global entanglements, began. The result is a rare cultural festival that's both joyous and educational.

SAIL25 was less a festival than a citywide homecoming, hundreds of historic and modern ships returning to the waters that made Amsterdam, and millions of visitors returning to a tradition that has anchored the city's cultural calendar for half a century.

Whether spectators turned up for mast-top selfies or to trace the lines of vessels that once brought continents together, SAIL 2025 delivered scale, story and spectacle in equal measure, and for free, right in the centre of town.

Images: From SAIL25 www.sail.nl/en

Reflecting on SAIL Amsterdam 2025

I arrived in Amsterdam in a rush, disembarking the overnight ferry from Ipswich at the Hook van Holland wharf and onto a crowded train, racing through the Dutch countryside. I was off to join Alvei, a three-masted schooner flagged in Vanuatu, to watch the 2025 SAIL starting parade. In the last years Alvei has been an important platform for young mariners to learn the traditional arts of seamanship, offering young people the chance to experience life under sail. Onboard I was meeting an old friend who has sailed onboard for two and a half years, progressing from deckhand to chief mate during his time onboard sailing through the Caribbean, across the Atlantic, and around Northern Europe.

Watching the SAIL Amsterdam parade from Alvei's mast.

SAIL Amsterdam is a major maritime event held in the Netherlands. Occurring every five years, the event brings together tall ships, historic vessels, modern ships, and maritime displays from around the world. Due to this being the 10th edition of SAIL, with 2020 being cancelled because of Covid, this years event was larger than previous years. A monumental 10,000 ships and boats from over twenty countries drew about 2.5 million visitors to Amsterdam. The streets and docks of Amsterdam were flooded with crowds of people where boats lined the quays and docks of the city, making the skyline a forest of masts and rigging. The main draw of the event were the tall ships. Europa, Eye of the Wind, Alexander von Humboldt II, Union, I and many more were open to the public with opportunities to walk around the decks and talk to the crew.

As the Schools, Youth, and Community Coordinator at Hunters Yard I understand the value of this event to lie in its engagement of the public through education, spectacle, and photo-ops. It is an important moment to inspire future generations to engage in the maritime industry through heritage ships and boats. However, it is also an opportunity for those of us working with heritage ships or fleets to see the work that boat-builders, sailors, and enthusiasts like ourselves are doing. While the tall ships seemed to draw the crowds, what stood out to me most during SAIL Amsterdam was the fleets of heritage Dutch boats. There was a plethora of small fleets of classes of boats from all over the Netherlands represented. It reminded me that all over the world, boatyards like Hunters and communities of enthusiasts are quietly preserving their own pieces of maritime history.

Words and images: Ela, Schools, Youth, and Community Coordinator

Restoration Trust - Heritage For Wellbeing - visit to Hunter's Yard

In October we had the Heritage for Wellbeing group visit Hunters Yard. This group is a project with the Restoration Trust which initiates and runs projects that connect people who live with mental health issues with heritage, including archaeology, ancient landscapes, historic places and archives.

The aim of this project is to stimulate friendship, curiosity and imagination. Nine people from this group visited Hunters Yard. Their visit included a walking tour of the yard and the fleet from Neville followed by a tour of the wherry Albion from Ela.

After a leisurely lunch we then took them for a three-hour sail to St Benet's Abbey. During their sail they were taking photos, drawing, and learning how to handle the Rebels. The visit was a powerful reminder that sailing with Hunters Yard nurtures not only the skills and spirits of young people, but also supports the wellbeing and heritage connection of all generations.

Robert Fairclough has kindly shared his drawings of the visit which you can see here.

More of his work can be found on his website (www.robfairclough.uk) and Instagram (www.instagram.com/robert.fairclough.71)

Words: Ela, Schools, Youth, and Community Coordinator

The Association of Yachting Historians

The AYH was created about 20 years ago, from a membership that might be said to have already existed, but didn't know it. The original membership Directory lists a dedicated group of people who were, and are, fascinated by the products of what might be called the golden age of "yachting" approximately between 1880 and 1939.

Late Victorian Britain and Ireland, the mainland of Europe and the East Coast of the USA were exploiting a long period of peace-time social and economic growth and change, out of which emerged some of the most spectacular sailing craft of recent history. For some of these craft, we might even compare their impact to the sudden design changes associated with foils in past 20 years of this century. The names of Watson, Mylne, Fife, Herreshoff, Camper & Nicholson, Anker all echo down the years, driven often by developments associated with the challenges for the America's Cup right up to a final challenge before WW2.

Everything changed after 1945. What happened next might be entirely blamed on the lack of wood and the lack of disposable income. "Yachting" very quickly became "Sailing" as Fireflies, Enterprises, National 12s, and Merlin Rockets became the new pastime and expenditure for those who wanted to get on the water in their own personal way.

The result of this fundamental shift was, overall, that the magazines that had faithfully reported on "yachting" over the previous 60 plus years lost their readership, and the newcomers to the sport of "sailing" had no personal back story on which to build their new experience and skills. Victorian Britain was the pinnacle of serial readership through magazines; all the great authors originally published their works, pre-eminently Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope all published serially in popular magazines. Out of this, emerged magazines like "The Field" and others, often packed full of detailed descriptions of the location of regattas, the yachts, the people and the results. Not until 1875 did an organisation merge to try and capture all this new activity in one place.

The result of this new activity meant that by the early 1950s there was a considerable archive that very few people knew about nor had much interest in, except where – in exceptional cases such as Glasgow University or the Greenwich National Maritime Museum – there was some local connection or enthusiasm for storage of such materials. Much of this treasure trove of archive has lain dormant for many decades. Museums and Tourist authorities have all struggled to know what to do with the both the archive printed materials and the boats themselves.

By the early 2000s, the dormant membership of the AYH was about to come into existence having discovered a mission in the digital world.

The Association emerged in 2005 when a widely different group of sailors began to realise that there was an "archive" problem around the community of clubs and classes, and it might be a good idea to try and bring some this together. You will find the Articles of the Association most importantly summarise this is as:

The Association will encourage the exchange of information between yacht club archivists and those working in maritime museums. The Association will also encourage exchange of information between members and those working in the media. The information would cover the story of design, construction and the use of small boats, either for racing or cruising.

The Association will encourage research and preservation of records and archives of clubs and private collections. The Association will encourage and help clubs and maritime museums to maintain a database for future generations. In this connection, the Association will support links with organisations e.g. the National Yachting Archive, the Classic Boat Museum and the Isle of Wight Maritime Heritage Centre, and others.

This "archive" and "knowledge" base fragility still exists. The regular editions of "Classic Yachting" and "Yachting Classique" frequently publish articles about the challenge of restoration being focussed accessibility of original plans and drawings. The most recent French edition of YC indicates that there is a possibility that collections of Fife, Watson and Mylne may be either lost or dispersed – unlike the Herreshoff materials collected by MIT in the USA. There are one or two individuals noted taking the time to acquire materials, but it's difficult when one knows that William Fife III burnt bundles of materials when the Admiralty took over the boatyard in World War 2! There success stories of large caches of materials being saved however, so do not despair.

The AYH is doing what it can to gather materials from published sources to digitize them, and this is, currently, its primary activity followed by meetings and visits for its members around the UK and Europe. Lloyds Register, The Yachtsman, The Field and Yachting World Annuals can found and searched by members from the website. The article by Gina Hunt in the 1973 YW Annual deserves a read, not least for describing the "Bertie Woosters" sailing International 14s, but also for the prophecy of foiling for all, large and small – a gem to read. The observation about I4 sailors perfectly sums up the tensions between 'yachting' and 'sailing' from the 1950s onwards; now we must use the word "boating" to encompass all, while we rescue yet another paddle boarder from a rip tide.

We are currently exploring a number of possible meetings and extended visits – the AYH visits have covered much of the UK and North West Europe – Brexit, Covid and Cost of Living has dented this enthusiasm for travel, but it is our intention to rekindle it. We have had to work hard to recover the membership, so we hope to attract many new members, as well as recover previous ones.

I took over from Hal Sisk, of Dun Laoghaire, in March 2024, with the intention of creating a new interactive website and members forum, and re-invigorating the membership. We are a diffuse Committee, but we do represent key parts of the Classic environment from skills training to Classic yachting; we are currently going through a process of transition to find new Hon Vice Presidents as time and tide have taken three 'across the bar' in the past eighteen months. It is my intention to also seek to widen the historic perspective to draw in more attention to the "small boats" that have made up the base of so much sailing until recently. There still many, many 'boats in barns' of all sizes that deserve not to be lost as part of 'boatings' long history. It is hoped that AYH members can continue to campaign for the discovery and support of all types of historical sea and river going craft. I hope we can persuade the Hunter Fleet to join us a corporate member, and widen the 'classic' perspective across the Broads.

©John Evans. AYH Chair

The Friends Skippered Sails

For more than 15 years, the Friends of Hunter's Fleet have been coming together each June for the Skippered Sails — a week of sailing, fellowship, and gentle adventure aboard Percy Hunter's famous yachts. It is a tradition that runs deep: one part reunion, one part pilgrimage, and always a celebration of the rivers Bure, Ant, and Thurne.

Beginnings at the Yard

The week began,as it always does, at Hunter's Yard. Crews gathered by the water, two to a boat, sipping tea on benches as the skippers prepared the Hustlers. White canvas awnings were lifted, ropes coiled, gaffs rigged, and the varnished hulls gleamed in the early summer sun. There was laughter from the start, as familiar faces greeted one another. For many, this has become a long-standing ritual — returning each year to the same boats, the same rivers, the same friendships. Yet there is always a note of poignancy.

"There comes a time when we can no longer sail alone, yet the river need never be lost to us"

It is also, for many, a lifeline. There comes a time when age or illness makes it impossible to take out a boat alone. Lines become heavier, sails more demanding, moorings more awkward. But these sails remind us that we need not lose the river, nor the joy of handling a yacht that was designed for these waters. The Friends' week is not a passenger trip — it is a shared, living sailing experience.

This year one absence was felt keenly. Fran, a long-time Friend, has now grown too frail to sail with us. For years, she and her husband explored the Broads together; after his passing she never expected to sail again. But when she read of the Skippered Sails in the Friends' magazine, she joined immediately, and for more than a decade found herself once again out on the water, smiling in the silence, feeling the river under her. She represents exactly what these sails are about: giving back something thought lost.

"For many, it is a chance to rediscover something they thought was gone forever."

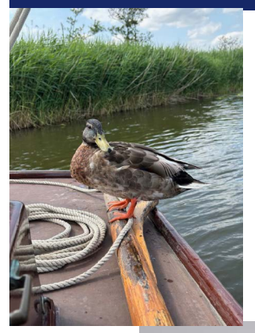
The River Opens

With crews aboard, we moved to the head of the Dyke. Moored head-to-wind, the boats tugged gently at their bows, as though impatient to be free. Then, as the canvas filled, they surged forward — the Hustlers coming alive, boats that have sailed these waters for nearly a century, still as restless as ever to move.

The river quietens you. Once the sails are drawing, conversation falls away, and suddenly the sounds around you sharpen: the call of a reed bunting, the rustle of reeds, the lap of water against mahogany planks. It is a spellbinding silence, alive with detail.

Our first leg took us down the Bure,running with the wind at our backs. A gentle turn to starboard at Thurne Mouth, and we were reaching and tacking our way up towards St Benet's Abbey. There, sails were scandalised to reduce speed, heads brought to the wind, and one by one the Hustlers came onto the moorings. Crews stepped ashore, the kettle was set to boil, and lunch was taken in the shadow of this ancient abbey.

"The silence is spellbinding — every bird call, every rustle from the reeds comes alive."



a very gentle and sometimes non-existent breeze.
It is a test of your sailing prowess; a challenge which we all relish.

Some Hustlers are now fitted with small electric 'quants' — 'Torqeedo' pods with propellors that provide silent assistance when the wind

drops entirely. My boat, Hustler 2, isn't yet so equipped, so I occasionally took up the quant pole, pushing rhythmically through the lull until the sails caught again, while the other skippers used gentle bursts of electric power to carry their boats effortlessly forward.

"These boats were designed here, for here — and they show it with every tack and turn."

Evening Ashore

Horning Reach

After lunch, the breeze carried us past Horning Hall, towards Ranworth Dam, and on towards Horning Church Reach. Here, the trees become more prevalent along both banks, throwing a wind shadow across the water. Beautiful as they are this shadow prevents the wind getting into our sails. It can be a steady breeze away from the trees but between their green shield it's

Late in the afternoon, the boats were snugged at Horning Staithe. Crews settled into The Moorhen B&B while skippers drew the awnings tight. By evening, everyone gathered again — this time at The White Horse in Neatishead. The pub buzzed with conversation, stories swapped over hearty food, and the laughter of a dozen Friends who had once again found themselves afloat.

"The day ends with laughter and full hearts — the true measure of a Friends' sail."

The Homeward Beat

The following day began with an excursion into Blackhorse Broad. The entrance is notoriously narrow, demanding confidence to carry a boat through without room to tack. But Hustlers, built by Percy Hunter with no plans but his own skill and instinct, were made for precisely this kind of sailing. They glide forward where others falter, as if the water remembers them.

The journey home brought a freshening breeze, and with it, a real challenge. Tide and wind were both against us, making for a lively, testing beat back to the Yard. This was no pleasure cruise — this was proper sailing, and the Friends rose to it with determination and delight. Crews took the helm for most of the way, the skippers stepping in only when needed. That is their greatest gift: knowing when to let go, when to encourage, when to let someone else feel the full pull of a sailboat straining against the wind.

Lunch was taken on the island at Malthouse Broad in brilliant sunshine, before the final run down the Thurne. We slipped past mills and meadows, guided a few bewildered cruisers safely around us, and turned at last into Womack Dyke. Sails were scandalised, fenders lowered, and the Hustlers brought smartly head to wind at Hunter's Yard.

"It is not just sailing. It is heritage — living, breathing, and shared."

Closing the Week

As the covers went back on and the last ropes were made fast, the talk had already turned to next year. The Skippered Sails hold an irresistible draw. They are not just about handling a boat, but about belonging — to the river, to the fleet, and to one another.

Nearly a century after Percy Hunter built these yachts without plans, guided only by eye and hand, they remain what they always were: the perfect vessels for this landscape, carrying those who love them into silence, beauty, and joy.

"The draw of these magical waters and these remarkable boats is as strong as ever."

Words and images by Neil Hopkinson, skipper and Chair of the Association of Friends of Hunter's Yard

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Anything related to activity on the Broads, such as sailing or motor boats, associated equipment such as sails or trailers, Broads businesses, accommodation or services.

Advertisements would be for one edition of Wood & Water, issued quarterly, currently to around 2500 recipients, all proceeds supporting The Norfolk Heritage Fleet Trust to helping deliver sailing and education from Hunter's Yard.

A second issue can be added at a 40% discount. Longer periods by negotiation

The advertisement would also appear on the Hunter's Yard website for the same period

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